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U.S. Children's Bureau

To parents in wartime

[Washington]

[1942]

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To Parents in Wartime

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Children In Wartime No. 1
Bureau Publication 282
CHILDREN'S BUREAU
United States Department of Labor

4/10/42 PS

To Parents in Wartime

The first line of defense is the home!

AS armies march, planes fly, ships sail, and factories hum with the tremendous effort of total war, the security, the protection, and the morale of the families at home are fundamental to our success. Our children are as much a concern of our Government in this emergency as are the soldiers and munitions workers who carry on the war directly. Nowhere in the world have children held the place of prime importance in the scheme of living and in the thoughts and consideration of adults as in the United States. Nowhere is there a body of more conscientious parents earnestly and eagerly trying to provide the most intelligent care for the physical and mental health and development of their children.

So . . .

Parents should prepare for defense

WHEN war was declared, parents all over the United States had the same immediate reaction. Through their minds flashed the images of their children wherever they were and whatever they were doing, with the accompanying thoughts: Are they safe? What must we do to protect them? How can we help them through the war days to come?

Newspapers, schools, clinics, teachers, and doctors were beset by inquiries about how parents should handle this emergency with respect to their children—an eloquent proof that our boast about our American parenthood is justified. Parents want to meet this new challenge as they have met the other less spectacular ones in the past, with courage and wisdom.

The question they want answered is—

How? . . .

Two principal suggestions to parents are the result of real agreement in all the answers made to this question. They are perhaps disappointing in their undramatic firmness, but they both require a great deal of thought and effort.

1. Prepare yourselves to face whatever may come.

2. Help your children to continue living their everyday lives with as little change as possible.

THE FIRST SUGGESTION • Prepare yourselves to face whatever may come

Your children can take it if you can

FRANKLY, every parent is anxious. Every intelligent adult must recognize the dangers, the upsets, and the changes involved in the total war we are all embarked upon. Parents must, with the help of the community, appraise the real situation in which they specifically live. So how are parents to behave even though anxious about their children?

Intelligent fear can be helpful

The dangers and risks that parents may have to face produce an actual fear that might better be admitted to themselves to start with. But there is a vast difference between an intelligent facing of a difficult or even dangerous situation and an anxious and destructive dread of an unprepared-for blow.

Children sense the feelings of those they love

Children, far more than adults realize, sense the underlying thoughts and feelings of those they love. What parents think and feel about a situation has far more effect than anything they may say. Therefore it is wiser to be honest with your children and to command their respect by talking to a certain extent and quite normally about the danger of air raids and fires and the possibility of separations in the family when such dangers and possibilities actually exist.

Call things by their right names

Above all, don't suppress or banish from family conversation all reference to war. It is a topic your children will certainly hear discussed everywhere else. Children can bear reality much better than the uncertainty created by a mystery. A specific suggestion on this point may be helpful: Use the same words that are heard constantly in school, on the street, and over the radio. Don't make up pretty names to soften the meaning of terms like "black-out," "alarms," "explosions," and the like. If an air-raid drill is planned at home, don't call it "a sort of fire drill." Fear of words communicates fear of the situation itself to the sensitive imagination of a child.

Appraise dangers frankly

It is always best for him to hear of possible dangers from those he loves most. It is best for him to realize very early that those he trusts are preparing to face emergencies with him. This frank appraisal of dangers where they actually exist is an important step toward the sort of behavior that parents want to achieve even though they cannot escape their anxiety for their children.

When we are busy we have little time to worry

The next step follows from the fact that dependence of someone else on us for calm and strength often helps us to behave as though we really had both. And behaving as though we were calm for the sake of others finally produces a degree of real calm. With reasonable conviction and courage we can try to understand what is ahead of us and what we should do about it. We must satisfy ouselves that we have taken every reasonable precaution. Then, the busier we are with those things that really need to be done, the less time we shall have to indulge ourselves in useless worries about things that may never happen anyway.

Anxiety

ANXIETY is normal, natural, useful. It is a signal that awakens and prepares the individual to meet impending danger. This state of mind that we call *anxiety* is characterized by alertness, awareness, and fear appropriate to the situation that creates the anxiety. Increased blood supply and oxygen provide the fuel for additional bodily activity and, in association with increased muscular tone and acuteness of sight and hearing, represent a sort of "getting up steam" process that anticipates and prepares for action.

Anxiety is a natural emotion

Anxiety is closely associated with the instinct for self-preservation, and its function is that of protecting the individual by making him aware and ready to meet a crisis. Anxiety is not something to be ashamed of. Like grief, anger, and joy, it is a normal emotional response to a life situation and should be looked upon as having a perfectly normal background and a useful function.

The chronic worrier contributes little

There are those individuals, however, who seem to be in a state of continuous anxiety. They are the worriers of the world. They seem to suffer from constant anticipation of the worst, and consequently they are susceptible to anything that tends to increase their ever-present sense of insecurity. Such individuals are extremely sensitive to gossip and rumor, and in their effort to be reassured they spread their pessimistic tales from one person to another, and usually the tales become more and more gloomy the more frequently they are told. Truly it may be said that they are the type who see the hole but never the doughnut. These individuals, whether they be parents, teachers, or other adults to whom children would naturally turn in time of danger, will have nothing to contribute but a reflection of their own sense of insecurity.

Children often worry because those around them worry

Children who have the misfortune to have been brought up in an environment dominated by such individuals, not infrequently take on a similar pattern of thinking and acting; and such children well may be in need of special consideration in time of crisis. It will be important and helpful for these children to be in a group with others who entertain a more normal, healthier outlook and are able to participate in the occupations and diversions that may be created for just such emergencies.

Each child's temperament is different

WE must keep in mind also that the temperaments and dispositions of children vary markedly in the same families and that something deeper and more fundamental than environmental influences may be the cause of their timidity and anxiety. In their efforts to allay undue fears, parents should try to evaluate the particular needs of each child.

One child may be self-reliant.—Tommy, aged 5, a keen, alert, busy, "out-going" sort of lad, has a very active military existence in his play life. His toys are a miniature rifle, a soldier hat, a cannon, a bomber, and an army truck. Most of his play activity is reduced to war games, and much of his conversation has to do with his concept of war. He is a sturdy boy who takes everything in his stride, and his imaginary ideas are immediately converted into objective activities. He has no fear or even anxiety and has found a satisfactory outlet for his fantasies in objective play.

Another needs more reassurance.—Phyllis, aged 8, has been unduly perturbed for the past 2 years about the war situation. Frequently her nights are disturbed by terrifying dreams, and she is constantly demanding reassurance from her mother that nothing is going to happen to her or to her family. This youngster has always been a sensitive child. She complains about her looks, that she is not liked by other children,

that she doesn't get a square deal. She thinks that life is pretty difficult and is always seeking attention.

The difference in temperament of these two children, even though they belong to the same family, is somewhat indicative of the importance of considering every child as needing individual consideration.

Teach them that fear is not cowardice

It will be most helpful for all children to understand that being afraid is not being cowardly and that life presents in our everyday routine many situations that require unusual courage—the tooth that has to be pulled; telling the truth when we know that someone we love is going to be unhappy and that punishment may result; speaking for the first time before the class; the first ride on a bicycle or perhaps a venturesome slide down a very steep hill; the first spring from a diving board. These are all experiences attended by a bit of anxiety, sometimes actual fear, but most children will recall that fear of what was going to happen was worse than the actual experience.

Children should not be teased because they fear

It is very important that children should not be teased or humiliated because of their fears, but encouraged to carry on bravely in spite of them in an environment that is as normal, natural, and happy as circumstances shall permit. Most children will find out that they have the capacity to "take it," and as soon as the initial reaction to danger has passed they will have a sense of relief and new courage, and confidence will be established with which to meet subsequent threats.

WHICH BRINGS US TO THE SECOND SUGGESTION • Help your children to continue their everyday lives with as little change as possible

PARENTS will have to prepare themselves for a long job of maintaining family morale under emergency conditions. This can best be done by going about the daily business of living as much as possible as though conditions were normal. Under most circumstances parents have the delicate task of adjusting to members of the family who differ in age, temperament, and needs. Under circumstances of national emergency each one of these individual needs is peculiarly and particularly emphasized.

War brings new pressures on the family

The adults in the family are under new pressures in regard to work, to financial problems, to shifts in living conditions. Husbands will have longer hours of work; the rise in prices will affect the food budget; some items and some materials may be short and others may have to be substituted; the place of work or the home itself may be moved—any or all of these changes will bring along with them perplexing problems for the grown people in the family to solve. Women will realize that their husbands are facing important changes in their work at the same time that their children have need of particular attention. Husbands will be aware of this complexity in their wives' responsibilities and must be prepared for their anxiety and occasional confusion about where to place their emphasis at a particular moment.

Each member of the family should feel useful

The elderly members are likely to feel useless and in the way. It would be helpful to find some way to make them feel valuable and to find occupations that will relieve their anxieties or at least keep them manageable. Each adult in a family must try to understand and be as sympathetic as possible toward the others who are having to adjust to new tensions, pressures, excitement, and changes. Total war cannot leave anyone untouched, no matter how physically safe or remote.

Prepare your children for defense

EACH child in the family will feel the crisis differently and will understand it in terms of his age, sex, and temperament—his own unique make-up. It is the business of parents to understand these differing reactions so far as possible and to be ready whenever their help is needed.

Fathers are always enormously important in their children's lives—never more so than in times of anxiety and confusion. And yet, in war they are likely to be away from home for longer hours of work or in service of one sort or another and to be tired and preoccupied when they are at home. Even so, fathers, knowing that their strength and influence are vital to the whole family, should try to stay close to their children and to be with them as much as possible. This may mean changing some of the hours for meals or even bedtime, but it will be well worth the children's losing some sleep for the sake of seeing their father. They will feel greater security under changed conditions if they know the family is facing life together.

Of course, this will be more difficult if the father's work or service takes him completely out of the home. But he can still remain in the thoughts and conversation as an important part of the children's lives and an essential part of the family itself. During wars there are fewer and fewer men about, and children miss them and sense an upset in the normal

balance of life. If the father must be away altogether, perhaps other male relatives may be ready to assume some responsibility toward the children. Group activities led by men in the neighborhood or in school or church will help without changing the loyalty and affection of a child for his own father and home.

The little child

IT is a comfort to parents to know that their very small children, even through kindergarten age, cannot imagine or see in the future what our anxieties and knowledge make very real to us. They can imagine only what they themselves have experienced. They may seem to understand because they pick up the terms that other people around them use. Sensing fear or anxiety, they may describe things with the same words as are current with adults but which do not have the same meanings for them. For instance, one little boy understands the war as a big game to catch Hitler. Another very dependable child tells about his dreams of Hitler coming over here and taking everything away. To most small children Hitler symbolizes all "badness," and is the object of their feeling of antagonism.

Treat their problems normally, unexcitedly

Actually children will show fear less by their words than by their actions. They may be irritable, hard to please, restless, or they may even make the most of the chance to get special attention and privileges. A kindergarten teacher reported that after the first air-raid drill there was next day an irritability and restlessness throughout the group that the children themselves couldn't connect with anything in particular. Try to treat all these behavior problems as normally as you can; try not to let any of your children, whatever their ages, live in anxious anticipation of dangers that do not exist.

The little child needs personal comfort

When a situation arises to cause actual fear, such as alarming war talk, drills, or an event of real danger, parents know from long experience that the best way to comfort a little child is to take him in their arms, to cuddle him close, or hold his hand. The only security he knows is the personal one of the grown people in his life, and their protection is essential to him in moments of insecurity and fear. This protected feeling can be given in the simplest and most direct fashion by giving the little child physical security and comfort.

In preparing for defense, all parents need to do is to remember their own childhood experiences and the things that have happened in the past with their children, to take note of the way they felt and acted so that when an emergency arises they will automatically do what will comfort and sustain each member of the family. The little child can feel your fears through your touch, even though your face and voice seem calm, but it is wise to remember that if you have confidence in yourself he too will be calm.

Give simple instructions, and not too many

Another suggestion about the little child is to avoid too much drilling and preparation, but instead to give a few very simple and specific instructions and some small responsibility that is especially his to be occupied with—what he is to do, where he is to go, and a favorite toy to be taken with him. It would be well to shift his toys occasionally, so that he does not become too attached to one. Little children derive much comfort and reassurance from familiar things, so a well-loved object will help at once to make unfamiliar surroundings seem less strange and fearful.

One important bit of advice comes out of the experience of England. Let your children express their fears frankly. Don't let them try too hard to be brave. It is going to be perfectly natural for children as well as adults to be frightened

by some things that may occur, even by the talk and uncertainty and preparations in the community Let them see the naturalness of their fear. Let them express it. Try to be natural yourselves. Reassure them by the physical comfort of contact and warmth and food, and the possession of some favorite toy to cling to.

The grade-school group

GENERALLY speaking, the child in the grades has quite different reactions from the little ones at home or in kindergarten. The boy or girl of 8 or 10 is intensely interested in activity and in the way things work. He is quite alive to all that is going on around him. He likes to dramatize his activities as well as the things that he sees and hears. The war, remote or near at hand, will give him considerable excitement and fun. Already many school children are changing their time-honored game of prisoner's base and cops and robbers to air raids and ambulance and stretcher drills and real war games.

They still need to feel close to their parents

This is all right for the daytime, but these same children away from the gang at night are often subject to daydreams and nightmares of very real terror. Often what children of this age suffer in their own imaginations when alone is far worse than any reality and actually more harmful. A child of this age has begun to belong to a gang and to make some efforts at emancipation from home. But with all his apparent independence he is in need of parental support when he is worried or frightened. It is essential that parents, even while they allow this child his independence and group activity, should keep in close and tactful contact with him, so that he may express to them his fears and anxieties. His wish to talk over his worries is more likely to be expressed at nighttime when he is away from the security of the group.

Give them some responsibilities

Suggestions to help this age are: First, a frank discussion of the facts about the war and the particular situation of the family. This will help to get rid of imagined horrors. Then, to bring fantasy and reality closer together, children of school age should have definite duties and responsibilities. There should be group discussions in school and at home, and specific tasks should be assigned. Mothers can plan beforehand with their children to do certain things—depending on them to put up window curtains, to see that little children stay away from windows, and similar tasks. They can be junior air-raid wardens, can do junior Red Cross work and first aid, and can start learning many things that will be useful to them and the community later. At the same time they will be dealing actively with reality, and in facing reality they will be getting help for themselves.

The adolescent group

LITTLE as we are likely to think so, the adolescent group is going to require our understanding and support as much as the other two. We instinctively protect our little children, and we know the continuing need of our young school children. But the high-school girl and boy and those just starting to work present problems at all times that are complex and often difficult to understand. More than any other group in the community are their lives profoundly changed and their difficulties increased by war. We can maintain our young children's lives reasonably the same under changing conditions; we can celebrate birthdays, have small parties, transfer their usual games to war interests with a minimum of upset. But adolescence is a terrific speeding-up process anyway and war makes it more so.

War forces our young people to grow up almost overnight. We expect the boys to become soldiers and the girls to take

their places in home service, at an age when ordinarily we are still treating them as big children. Under war conditions adults are needed and demanded, and our eager, conscientious youth are going to meet that demand. They will be taking a responsible place in the community and in the home, and their capacities will be developing at breathtaking speed.

Be sensitive to their changes of mood

At the same time, though the adolescent's imagination is fully developed and his sense of duty especially keen, a heavy toll of his emotions is going to be taken. At this particular age he will not show his emotions as directly as younger children, or even as simply as adults do. Adolescents try to hide their feelings from adults, so let us be as sensitive as we can to the changes of mood that they will be feeling, and at the same time let us respect their wish for privacy. War rushes the process of moving from the complete protection of infancy to the emancipation of adulthood, but it cannot altogether alter that process. Occasionally our adolescents will return to their childhood need of protection, comfort, and security. Let us try now more than ever to recognize this need when it arises and be ready to satisfy it.

Help them to grow up wisely

Specific problems will arise in connection with adolescent responsibilities and opportunities. For instance, young people will become economically independent much earlier in wartime. This sudden growing up is not all a loss. Many of our youth have lived through a lot of deprivation during the depression, and the opportunity for work is a real advantage and will make up for some of the things they have not had. The boy or girl who has had no money or has had a small weekly allowance will go out and get a job and be earning his own freedom and planning his own recreation.

Again, early marriages are a part of the speeding-up process and may be looked upon with disfavor or even fear for the future. But really it will be reassuring to parents to know that early marriage is far better than the postponement that occurred for financial reasons during the depression. The big problem is to help adolescents to use their new freedom and independence wisely. Parents cannot expect the same rules and behavior to be maintained now as in other days. But they can suggest sensible uses for money and plans for savings, can be sympathetic with young love affairs, and can recognize the growing adult in their midst.

The more responsibilities they can assume, the better

The best safeguard for our prematurely adult young people is to take them fully into preparations for defense and actual war work. The more responsibilities they can assume, the more naturally they and their families can accept their relatively sudden maturity. Girls can take over more duties at home. Outside, in addition to Red Cross and other war work, they can help in nursery schools and centers for child care. Boys can take their turn as airplane spotters and at other defense duties and can also prepare in their spare time for specific jobs in radio, airplane, and auto mechanics and repair work, scientific farming and gardening, and the like. Those still in school should have definite courses directed toward war and relief training, home and farm economics with a special view to the war situation; out-of-school hours should be filled with jobs that will satisfy their urge to be of service and their need for adult responsibility.

Prepare your family for its wartime place in the community

PARENTS are the most important adults in a child's life. Their behavior and way of living under all conditions have the most profound effect on their children. But all are members of a community and share in a common responsibility for the schools, the local defense councils, and the national Government. It is not enough to use common sense and good judgment in keeping a normal balance at home, for school has a large place in every child's life, and his education and his experiences with his own group are of vital importance to him.

From Washington to the smallest village, our Government of which each one of us is a part is concerned with our welfare and safety and above all with the protection of our children and of the family group. Each community is working out its own plans within the general plan, and cooperation to the fullest extent is urgently desired. In emergencies all must follow common instructions which will differ in each community and school according to the particular needs of each. All eventualities, no matter how remote, are being taken into account, and plans are being made for them. Many of the plans may never be needed, but it is reassuring to know that every possible precaution is being taken for the children's safety, health, and happiness. For instance, plans are under consideration for evacuation if that should ever be necessary, and no effort will be spared to prevent the home and school life from being upset any more than it has to be.

If parents can realize that when their children are beyond the range of their own protective care they are under that of people in schools or community groups specially selected and trained for the job, they will face the future with greater courage and confidence. Each one, in developing confidence in himself and in those working together for the benefit of all, helps to safeguard the children, the home, and the Nation.

Group activities

CONFIDENCE in and cooperation with teachers, those directing the community programs of preparedness, and the national Government is a part of the job that parents are undertaking in the big scheme of defense. Other adults besides a child's parents can and do feel the deepest concern and responsibility for him. They can and do give him wise and loving care. Sometimes children, especially adolescents, express themselves more freely and take advice more easily from older friends outside the family circle than they do at home. Often an adult of tact, wisdom, and sympathy can be the center of a whole group of young people who will unburden themselves there without fear of increasing the perplexities of their families. Such grown people, often parents themselves, will have an important place in the community program for defense.

Children find strength in one another

Activities of peacetime will be increased in such groups as church clubs and young people's associations, in Scout troops, recreation centers, and similar groups. Experience has shown that even little children derive a great deal of security and comfort from other children and from members of a group. The school-age child who has begun to get his satisfaction from the gang finds great enjoyment and security in his group. From that time on, group contacts mean more and more to children. It is also true that children of all ages help each other to overcome fear and develop a companionship in interests together and in physical contact with each other like holding hands, or even touching one another, that is almost as fundamentally protective as the security offered by adults. For instance, one little child in an English center always went to sleep with his hand on the shoulder of the child in the cot next to his.

An example of children's group interests and support and the wise care of adults in charge of them comes from the first air-raid test in a large city in this country. A little boy of 6 on his return home was asked what had happened, where they went, and what they did. At first he said it was a secret and he couldn't tell. On further questioning it seemed his class had continued their Christmas preparations in the place assigned to them for safety, and the boy's one idea was not to let out the secret of his mother's Christmas present! The air-raid drill had not made the slightest impression on him or his class.

We are told that in England children sleep through air raids and that they have shown very little emotional disturbance due to this experience. A recent broadcast [1] from England is interesting not only on this point but in relation to other points made in this pamphlet. The people of Australia in preparing for possible bombing by Japanese asked how their children were likely to stand it. In answer to this question the broadcast stated:

"Our experience ought to encourage them. The school medical officer of the county of London reported last week that there was no evidence among London children of any nervous disorder or shock caused by air raids. They stood it as well as adults, maybe better. Nor did living in air-raid shelters do them any harm. We had no epidemic of disease.

"The bad effects seemed to be first on their education. When hundreds of thousands of the children were evacuated to the country there was a shortage of school buildings. The schools were taken over for Civilian Defense, and a good many children got little or no education. When the problem was fully understood it was put right, and by last June nearly 98 percent of British children were once more getting full-time schooling.

"The second bad effect was an increase in what is called juvenile delinquency, but what the ordinary parent calls

[1] Rebroadcast by WOR on Sunday, January 11, 1942, of a BBC broadcast by E. A. Montague.

'naughtiness.' A lot more children got in trouble with the police in the first year of the war than in the last . . . The causes were chiefly the breaking up of the home life and home discipline. Fathers were in the army and mothers were doing war work. Children had too much time on their hands. Not being able to go to school, the ease of stealing from bombed buildings and the excitement of the war in general helped them to kick up the devil."

This broadcast went on to emphasize the problem of the 16-or-17-year-old boy who suddenly earns high wages. Not having had much if any money before, he has no idea how to spend it, and in England it was found that he spent it on excitements and foolish pleasures that finally got some of them into more or less serious trouble. The solution seems to be to reduce the amount of spending money and to have the balance put into various sorts of savings and defense budgets. This lets the adolescent help carry the burden of the war as an adult would and at the same time provide for his own future.

The most important things we can learn from this report are that children do not suffer so greatly from anxiety or shock but that the upset in home life and in their schooling has the worst effect upon them. It is an encouraging message, especially in view of the fact that all the plans of our Government have taken this into account and are calculated to avoid disturbance to family and school routine so far as that may be possible.

Prepare your children by helping them face life

WE cannot protect our children from life. We can only help them to face it and go forward. In order to be a part of the community, children must take their own share of responsibility along with adults. It is conceivable that if children are separated from their parents during periods of stress, a

distance will grow up between them based on the fact that the young persons have nothing in common with the sufferings of their parents. Pioneer parents did not leave their children in safer places while they pushed west to build a new country. Those children shared in the building.

Wise parents do not try to seek complete safety for their children. We have had more deaths from automobile accidents than England has had from air raids in the same length of time. But we do not forbid our children to ride in cars. We do emphasize precaution in cars. We must learn and practice all proper precautions in regard to air raids and war in general, and then go about our business, not preoccupied with danger but intent on doing the best job possible. We must encourage our children to accept the challenge of work and the opportunity to face life's realities.

So . . .

Prepare yourselves for whatever the future may bring.

Help your children to continue living their everyday lives.

Your children can take it if you can.

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